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ABSTRACT

Most research on premature termination from therapy has focused on client attitudes. This study examined therapists' attitudes toward their own behavior and toward their clients at intake in relation to premature termination. Premature termination was studied after different numbers of sessions to determine the relationship of therapist attitudes at intake to client premature termination at different phases of treatment. Six psychotherapy practicum trainee therapists served as therapists; 208 college students who sought help at a counseling center served as clients. After initial interviews, therapists completed the Therapist Personal Reaction Questionnaire (TPRQ), assessing therapist feelings toward the client and toward how well the therapist conducted the interview. Scores were analyzed relative to the premature termination of 64 clients, of whom 24 left after 1 session, 35 after 2-9 sessions, and 5 after 10 or more sessions. TPRQ responses indicated that therapists felt they had not understood or been as helpful to their premature terminating clients as to their normal terminating clients during the first session. Therapists felt particularly ineffective with clients who terminated prematurely after only one session. These findings highlight the importance of the initial interview to the course of treatment as assessed by the manner of client termination and number of sessions. (NB)

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RELATIONSHIP OF THERAPIST ATTITUDES AT INTAKE TO CLIENT PREMATURE TERMINATION

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Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Eastern Psychological Association, Buffalo, NY, April 21-24, 1988.

(1) Title of Paper: Relationship of Therapist Attitudes at Intake to Client Premature Termination

(2) Topical Session Preference(s): Clinical (Therapy), Clinical (Counseling)

(3) Problem or Major Purpose:

Premature termination from therapy is a well-studied phenomenon. Several investigations (i.e., Gunzberger, Henggeler, & Watson, 1985; Phillips, 1985) have shown that client attitudes formed during intake are related to continuation in therapy. Gunzburger et al. (1985) and Kokotovic and Tracey (1987) found that premature terminators were less satisfied with the intake session than were continuers. Kokotovic and Tracey (1987) found that clients who terminated prematurely viewed their therapists as less expert and trustworthy at intake than did clients who continued treatment.

Most research has focused on client attitudes. Since therapist attitudes are important contributors to therapy process and outcome (Phillips, 1985), this study examines therapists' attitudes toward their own behavior and their clients at intake in relation to premature termination.

Researchers have also tended to define premature termination differently. Some (Epperson, Bushway, & Warman, 1983; Kokotovic & Tracey, 1987) define it as failure to continue therapy after intake; others (Gunzburger et al., 1985; McNeill, May, & Lee, 1987) define it as leaving therapy before completing a certain number of sessions. This study examines premature termination after different numbers of sessions to determine the relationship of therapist attitudes at intake to client premature termination at different phases of treatment.

(4) Subjects:

Participants were 6 psychotherapy practicum trainee therapists (5 women, 1 man) who spent 2 days a week doing therapy in a university counseling center.

Their clients were 208 college students (128 women, 80 men) who sought help at the center during the 1985-86 academic year.

(5) Procedure:

After initial interview, therapists of clients who came to the center for the first time were asked by the reception secretary to complete the 15-item Therapist Personal Reaction Questionnaire (TPRQ; Davis, Cook, Jennings, & Heck, 1977). The items concern therapist feelings toward the client and therapist assessment of how well he or she conducted the interview. Each item is rated on a 5-point scale where "1" signifies "not characteristic" and "5" signifies "highly characteristic" of the therapist's feelings. The questionnaires were confidential; clients did not see therapists' ratings.

TPRQ scores were analyzed relative to premature termination, defined as terminating therapy by not returning to the center for scheduled appointments, and three categories of numbers of sessions, 1 session, 2 - 9 sessions, and 10 or more sessions.

(6) Results or Findings:

Of the 208 clients, 144 terminated by mutual agreement of therapist and client, 64 terminated prematurely. Of the premature terminators, 24 left treatment unilaterally after the first session, 35 left from the second to the ninth session, and 5 left after 10 sessions. Table 1 presents means, standard deviations, and F's associated with the TPRQ items differentiating normal and premature terminators.

Main effects were also found for sessions. Therapist responses to the item, "In general, I couldn't ask for a better client," were most positive for those clients staying for 10 or more sessions (M = 3.28, SD = 1.36), least positive for clients staying an intermediate number of sessions (M = 2.04, SD = 1.22), with

clients staying for 1 session receiving intermediate ratings (M = 2.35, SD = 1.37), F (2, 202) = 5.07, p<.008. The groups were ordered in the same way on responses to the item, "It's easier for me to see exactly how this client would feel in the situations he/she describes than it is other clients," (10 or more sessions M = 3.17, SD = 1.10; 1 session M = 2.18, SD = 1.30, 2 - 9 sessions M = 1.97, SD = 1.21) F (2, 202) = 6.02, p<.003.

There was only one significant interaction for the item, "I felt pretty ineffective with this client." Therapists agreed less with this item if the client terminated normally with agreement being greatest in the group of normal terminators for therapists of clients who terminated after only 1 session. Therapists agreed with this item more if the client terminated prematurely, especially if this happened after only 1 session, F (2, 202) = 4.08, p<.02.

(7) Implications and Conclusions

Since the study used practicum trainee therapists, results should be generalized only to similar groups. It is possible that findings using more experienced therapists would be different than those obtained here. The reader is also cautioned that most of the therapists were women.

The results indicate the importance of the very first interview relative to premature termination, even when that termination occurs after 10 or more sessions. Responses to TPRQ items indicate that therapists feel they haven't understood or been as helpful to their premature terminating clients as their normal terminating clients during the first session. This indicates that therapy did not get off to as good a start as it might have, and perhaps this carries through in subsequent sessions until the client eventually quits coming altogether. Therapists felt particularly ineffective with clients who terminated prematurely after only 1 session. The findings indicate the importance of

establishing a good working relationship in the very first session if the therapy is to proceed to the point of mutual termination by both therapist and client.

Therapists initially found it most difficult to empathize with clients who stayed in treatment an intermediate number of sessions, regardless of how these clients terminated. These clients were also not viewed as "good clients" relative to others the therapists saw. At the setting under study, there is no limit on the number of sessions a client may have. Clients seen for intermediate sessions would have been allowed more sessions. Perhaps these initial difficulties in the relationship helped to limit the therapy to a briefer period of time.

To summarize, the results highlight the importance of the initial interview to the course of treatment as assessed by manner of client termination and number of sessions. It is important for therapists to provide help and understanding for their clients at the very onset of treatment. Otherwise, treatment may be shortened and clients may terminate prematurely.

(8) References

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Table 1

Therapist Personnel Reaction Questionnaire Items Relating to Premature Termination

TPRQ Item	Normal Terminators		Premature Terminators		F	p
	M	SD	M	SD		
I was seldom in doubt about what this client was trying to say.	3.48	1.40	2.89	1.40	4.99	<.03
I usually found significant things to respond to in what the client said.	3.63	1.16	3.30	1.08	3.94	<.05
I was pretty ineffective with this client.	1.38	.78	1.55	.82	7.04	<.009
I think I did a competent job with this client.	3.77	1.09	3.52	1.18	3.64	=.05
It was hard to know how to respond to this client in a helpful way.	1.62	1.00	1.73	.95	4.41	<.04

df = 1, 202 in all cases.

Higher scores indicate the item is more characteristic of therapist feelings.

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